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Southern Chiefs' Organization Responds to the 2020 Federal Speech from the Throne

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) is encouraged by many of the commitments made yesterday in the Speech from the Throne, highlighting the federal government's priorities. However, concrete action is needed in order for the federal government to live up to its promises.

"Canada has made several promises to improve the lives of First Nation people, many of which SCO has long championed," said Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "We intend to hold the government accountable. If Canada is a place where we take care of each other, we must start with our most vulnerable, and that means our First Nation communities and peoples."

SCO supports many of the government's priorities mentioned in the speech from the throne. Advancing reconciliation, implementing UNDRIP, fighting climate change and addressing systemic racism would all greatly improve the lives of First Nation peoples and communities, provided they are implemented in meaningful consultation with First Nations.

We also welcome the government's promise to release its National Action Plan in response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Grand Chief Daniels remarked, "We support the acceleration of work on a National Action Plan in partnership with families and survivors, and for the government to take up the National Inquiry's Calls for Justice, which were delivered more than a year ago. But any progress on ending the epidemic of violence must recognize the current realities for First Nation women, girls, and 2SLGBTQQIA people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ending violence against First Nation women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people means creating more housing and shelters and stable income and employment opportunities to reduce vulnerability."

The government acknowledged the unique burdens placed on women during this time, including the disproportionately high number of jobs lost and increased caregiving demands. A national high quality early learning and child care system could begin to address the need on First Nations and grow the patchwork provincial system off reserve. First Nation people are the largest growing demographic in a country with an aging population, so having a robust and well-funded childcare system will help in the healthy growth of young families and allow parents to pursue careers, education and training.

It is encouraging to see the federal government commit to creating one million jobs and recognize that the pandemic has drastically impacted young people's employment opportunities. Scaling up the Youth Employment and Skills Strategy is a good step to ensure First Nation youth get the employment and training resources they need to be successful.

While SCO was hoping to see a guaranteed livable income in the throne speech, an expanded employment insurance system, new Canada Recovery Benefit and new Canada Disability Benefit will be critical as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit ends. Chiefs will be watching to see how discrimination already facing First Nation job-seekers and employees will be addressed in new employment and training programs and incentives to employers such as the Canada Employment Wage Subsidy.

When vulnerable people have access to housing, food, jobs, and mental health and wellness resources, crime is reduced and instances of child neglect are virtually non-existent. We call on the government to work with First Nation organizations to address gaps in Canada's social systems that disproportionately affect First Nation people and limit opportunities for our children and youth. SCO's Waakaabit initiative is a groundbreaking program that seeks to support capacity in southern First Nations at the individual, community, systemic, and governance levels in relation to the creation of First Nation family laws and child welfare services. More support and investment in programs such as Waakaabit is greatly needed.

The federal government has been found to be discriminatory in its funding of First Nations child welfare and education, and SCO continues to press for substantive equality. Grand Chief Daniels stated "Canada cannot regard itself as a first-world country while allowing its most vulnerable citizens to languish in poverty, fueling the child welfare industrial complex, which feeds our children in care to the justice system as youth and adults."

SCO welcomes the government's commitment to reform law enforcement and the RCMP, to move forward with community led policing and to design a framework that will see First Nation police agencies as an essential service. SCO has long advocated for enhanced civilian oversight of law enforcement agencies and for action on systemic inequities in all phases of the criminal justice system. The justice system and police culture are colonial, built on enforcing the displacement of Anishinaabe and Dakota lands and rights, and the over-policing of First Nation bodies and spaces.

Transforming the health of First Nations to address the growing 11 year gap in life expectancy is another priority area that SCO has championed, and we are supportive of the government's promise to expedite work to co-develop distinctions-based Indigenous Health legislation. The southern Chiefs have directed SCO to lead a community-led Health Transformation Initiative, which will reduce health inequities and enable Anishinaabe and Dakota peoples in southern Manitoba to assume greater control of their health and wellness.

Access to clean drinking water would also go a long way to improving the health of First Nation people. The government's pledge to make additional investments to meet its clean drinking water commitments is highly needed to end generations of systemic neglect and long term drinking water advisories. SCO is working to build a Water Authority in our territories to protect and guarantee safe water sources and infrastructure for southern First Nations.

“The federal government must now ensure that its actions meet promises contained in the 2020 Speech from the Throne,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “The COVID-19 pandemic presents the opportunity to rebuild life for the better in our territories, and to ensure a just recovery for all Canadians, starting with First Nation communities and peoples.”

SCO is currently expanding its services to meet the unique challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to provide our community members with support in navigating the various assistance programs offered at this time. We will continue to advocate that government do more, in consultation with First Nations, to help our communities overcome the many inequities that COVID-19 has created or worsened.

The Southern Chiefs’ Organization represents 34 Anishinaabe and Dakota First Nations that came together in 1999 to protect, preserve, promote, and enhance First Nations peoples’ inherent rights, languages, customs, and traditions through the application and implementation of the spirit and intent of the Treaty-making process.

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